# *The people's science*

## *The popular political economy of exploitation and crisis 1816–34*

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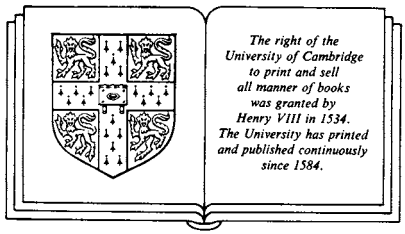


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# *Introduction*

Discussing the works of Mrs Marcet and Miss Martineau in an *Edinburgh Review* article of 1833, William Empson lamented that political economy, 'The science, which from its object ought to be pre-eminently the people's science, has yet made but little way to popular power and favour.'[1] Such chagrin was justified. A generation of propagandists and would-be educators[2] had plied their pens, with a vigour matched only by their conviction, to popularise what they saw as the fundamental tenets of classical orthodoxy. Yet, by 1833 at any rate, there was little indication that their proselytising had won the hearts and minds of the labouring classes for whose benefit they wrote. Nevertheless, Empson's outburst of annoyance is, in a sense, misleading. The labouring classes had not rejected political economy *per se* but only that brand of political economy purveyed by the classical popularisers. Indeed, by the date of Empson's review political economy had gone a considerable way towards achieving the status of a people's science. However, the science espoused was not that of the Mills, Ricardo, Torrens, McCulloch, Senior and their admiring acolytes but rather that of Hodgskin, Thompson, Gray, Owen and other, lesser, anti-capitalist and socialist political economists. It is with *this* people's science that this study is concerned or, more specifically, with the theoretical approach of anti-capitalist and socialist political economists to the twin evils of labour exploitation and general economic depression and

[1] W. Empson, 'Mrs Marcet – Miss Martineau', *Edinburgh Review*, 57 (April 1833), 8.

[2] Harriet Martineau, Jane Marcet, James Mill, Henry Brougham, Charles Knight, Francis Place *et al.*

the manner in which these were dealt with by writers in the working-class press of the period 1816–34.

The study begins with a survey of changing popular attitudes to the discipline of political economy as manifested in the working-class press and discusses the growing recognition of the need to utilise political economy to defend the material interests of the labouring classes. Why this occurred, why it occurred when it did and why this defence assumed the form which it did, are questions considered in chapter 2.

Chapter 3 examines the explanations for working-class emiseration provided by Charles Hall and Robert Owen, discussing some of the analytical deficiencies of anti-capitalist and socialist political economy in Britain prior to the advent of the Ricardian socialists and, together with chapter 2, seeks to highlight the decisive nature of the Ricardian socialist contribution to the formation of a people's science which could, by the late 1820s and early 1830s, confront popularised classical orthodoxy on its own conceptual terrain.

This contribution is discussed in more detail in chapter 4 where the structure and implications of Ricardian socialist labour exploitation theories are considered. Here histories of anti-capitalist and socialist economic thought such as those of Max Beer, G. D. H. Cole and Alexander Gray proved initially helpful but ultimately unsatisfactory, as it became obvious that an understanding of Ricardian socialist political economy necessitated some careful delving down to its possible classical roots. Chapter 4 undertakes this task with respect to their thinking on the determination of exchange value under capitalism and argues that their tendency to think through this problem along Smithian rather than Ricardian lines had profound repercussions, not only for the thrust of their own critical analysis but also, as is argued in chapter 6, for the form which popular, anti-capitalist and socialist political economy assumed in the working-class press of the late 1820s and early 1830s.

While chapters 4–6 consider theories of labour exploitation and their filtration into the working-class press, chapters 7 and 8 do the same for that other distinctive component of anti-capitalist and socialist political economy, the theory of general economic depression. Again, the purpose of these chapters is to consider critically the contribution of formal theorists, before

examining the treatment of this phenomenon by their popularisers.

Given that it is the working class of the period which is taken as the major popularising medium, three questions arise. First, which papers may be legitimately deemed to constitute the working-class press and why? Secondly, how popular was the people's science purveyed by working-class papers? Thirdly, why limit the study to the period 1816–34?

With reference to the first question, Royden Harrison's categorisation of 'labour periodicals' has been taken as a guide. Thus Harrison distinguishes three sub-species. First, those papers which were 'produced by an organised body consisting wholly or mainly of wage-earners or collectively dependent employees . . . Second . . . periodicals which were produced in the avowed interest of the working class – where that class was thought to have interests exclusive of the interests of other social classes or actively opposed to them . . . Third . . . those which were produced for wage-earners by members of other social classes.'[3] For the purpose of this study, the term 'working-class press' has been applied to those papers which fall into the first two of these three categories[4] while the third category has been ignored because it comprises papers which were produced simply to entertain or as a counterblast to all forms of radicalism by those who sought, primarily, to defend the status quo.

As regards the chronological limits of the work, it is tempting to state that for any study of the history of ideas the choice must inevitably be somewhat arbitrary but such evasion merits the obvious retort that some choices are more arbitrary than others. The short answer to the question, therefore, is that the chronological span of the work has been determined in large measure, though not exclusively, by the availability of primary source material of a 'popular' kind. Thus the study begins in 1816 because this date marks the advent of a cheap, radical press[5] with views to suit the predilections and a price to suit the pockets of a working-class readership. From this date, therefore, there is

[3] R. Harrison, G. Woolven and R. Duncan, *The Warwick Guide to British Labour Periodicals 1790–1970: A Check List* (Hassocks, Harvester Press, 1977), pp. xiii–xiv.

[4] ibid. p. 638, for a full list.

[5] S. Harrison, *Poor Men's Guardians, a record of the struggles for a democratic newspaper press 1763–1973* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p. 41.

sufficient literature to make feasible a study of the popularisation of economic ideas, though, in this context, it must be admitted that the early 1820s are particularly lean years.[6]

The closing date of 1834 is more difficult to justify. Thus a case could be made for extending the study to 1839 and the publication in that year of John Francis Bray's *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy*. This would have allowed a discussion of the economic writings of all the Ricardian socialists and thus obviated the need to confine consideration of Bray's political economy to cursory notice in chapters 4 and 7. Yet extending the study to 1839 would have involved other difficulties, particularly as regards length, for not only would it have necessitated the detailed examination of many more newspapers but it would also have required some discussion of the early Chartist press and thence the role of Chartists and Chartism in disseminating or failing to disseminate anti-capitalist and socialist economic ideas. To do full justice to these questions would require a separate study and one which would need to be carried through to 1848 or even 1850.

The year 1836 represents another possible terminal date as it saw the reduction of the stamp duty on newspapers in the Budget of that year and hence the virtual elimination of the significant price differential which had existed in the early 1830s between unstamped and stamped journals. It was this differential, together with the illicit nature of its radical offerings, which had given

[6] The newspaper stamp duty had been raised by ½d to 4d in 1815 but this had not prevented an efflorescence of radical journalism in the immediate post-Napoleonic War period (1816–19). However, in 1819, as part of a package of repressive legislation rushed through parliament in the aftermath of Peterloo, the Newspaper Stamp Duties Act was passed 'which by broadening the definition of a newspaper brought the cheap, Radical papers within the scope of the 4d stamp duty', A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press c.1780–1850* (London, Hone and van Thal, 1949), p. 9n. The purpose of this piece of legislation was made explicit in its preamble and was 'to restrain the small publications which issue from the press in great numbers and at a low price' and this to a large extent it succeeded in doing. Radical papers, in order to avoid prosecution, either had to pay the stamp tax and sell at a prohibitively expensive 7d or more or become monthly pamphlets retailing at an equally discouraging 6d. Some papers such as Carlile's *Republican*, Cobbett's *Register*, the *Medusa* and the *Cap of Liberty* made the transition but their popularity necessarily declined and it was only with the emergence of a co-operative press in the late 1820s and the burgeoning of the 'unstamped' in the early 1830s that the 'working-class press' recovered from this legislative blow. On these points see also P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press: a study in working-class radicalism of the 1830s* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. viii, and S. Harrison, *Poor Men's Guardians*, pp. 53–4.

the unstamped press of the 1830s its great appeal and after 1836, therefore, the character of much of the working-class press changes as radical publishers were forced to compete with stamped journals. In effect, 1836 marks the end of the 'Great Unstamped'.[7]

The year 1834 has been chosen, however, because it marks both a qualitative and a quantitative change in the popularisation of economic ideas by working-class papers. It marks the date when many papers which had provided an important forum for economic debate ceased publication. This year saw the demise of papers like the *Crisis*, the *Pioneer*, the *Voice of the West Riding* and the *Destructive*; and while the *Poor Man's Guardian* continued to be published until the end of 1835, among papers which devoted significant space to the discussion of economic questions, it proved the exception. In addition newly established papers in the period 1834–6 were increasingly oriented to the discussion of political and related issues such as universal suffrage and the campaign for the repeal of the stamp tax on newspapers. This was certainly true of the *Twopenny Dispatch* (1834–6), the *New Political Register* (1835–6), the *People's Weekly Dispatch* (1835–6), the *Political Register* (1834–5), the *Weekly Herald* (1836), the *Reformer* (1836) and the *Radical* (1836). Papers such as these discussing primarily political matters had of course existed, indeed flourished, in the early 1830s but not to the exclusion of those which devoted significant space to a consideration of those economic questions of specific interest to the labouring classes. Even a cursory examination of the working-class press after 1834 reveals a much less extensive dissemination of anti-capitalist and socialist economic thinking than had previously been the case.[8] It is primarily for this reason that the study has been terminated in 1834.

The question of how popular was the political economy purveyed by working-class papers is both interesting and important. However, the available evidence allows only a tentative answer. Some crude indication of popularity is given by circulation figures where these are available but such figures undoubtedly

[7] ibid. p. 98; 'working-class publishers' were brought 'face to face with a wide new field of competition'.

[8] There is a comparable and undoubtedly related diminution in the intensity with which classical doctrine was popularised.

underestimate the popular impact of the working-class press in this period. Indeed, one contemporary observer suggested that crude circulation figures should be multiplied by thirty to give an accurate indication of the numbers who read each paper printed.[9] This may be an exaggeration but it was undoubtedly the case that 'Remarkable efforts were made to get at the news. Men clubbed together to buy single copies. Old newspapers circulated through entire streets. Coffee houses and public houses took in newspapers for their customers to read. The 'pothouse oracle' read aloud extracts from newspapers and commented on what he read.'[10] In addition, readers could gain access to newspapers via Political Reading Societies, 'Political Protestant Associations', reading rooms attached to bookshops and by hiring and lending arrangements, while some newspapers were read out at large public meetings.[11]

Yet this still gives no clear indication of the extent to which the ideas, economic or otherwise, purveyed by these papers were understood or assimilated by their working-class readers; still less does it reveal whether the labouring classes accepted or approved the opinions and ideas which these papers contained. It is not possible to assume, for example, that the views on social, political and economic questions of articulate and literate, middle-class editors and writers such as 'Bronterre' O'Brien or J. E. 'Shepherd' Smith were imbibed indiscriminately by those of the working classes sufficiently motivated and literate to read and understand the *Poor Man's Guardian* or the *Pioneer*, for these writers were undoubtedly attempting to educate or mould working-class opinion in addition to reflecting it.[12] Nevertheless, as one writer has put it, 'We might none the less risk the generalisation that from 1816 to the early 1840s the relationship between radical

[9] G. Merle, 'Weekly newspapers', *Westminster Review*, 10 (April 1829), 478.

[10] R. K. Webb, 'The Victorian reading public', *Universities Quarterly*, 12 (1957–8), 37.

[11] A. Aspinall, 'The circulation of newspapers', *Review of English Studies*, 22 (1946), 33, 31, 42, 34.

[12] See, for example, the remarks of R. Johnson: 'we cannot assume that the attitudes of radical leaders and writers were those of 'the workers' . . . radical leaders were clearly involved in a process that was part mediation or expression of some popular feelings, and part a forming or an 'education' of them', 'Really useful knowledge, radical education and working-class culture 1790–1848' in J. Clarke, Chas. Critcher and R. Johnson (eds.), *Working-Class Culture, Studies in History and Theory* (London, Hutchinson, 1979), pp. 75–6.

leadership and working-class people was extraordinarily close'[13] and certainly it can be said that in the period after 1816 radical economic and political ideas sold newspapers and in some cases sold them in considerable numbers. 'The People's Science' would therefore appear to be a legitimate epithet to apply to the popular political economy of the working-class press.

[13] ibid. p. 93.